

Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields, 1900

By S. Robert Powell, Ph.D.

A number of small strikes took place in the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania from 1899 to 1900, by which the United Mine Workers gained experience and unionized more workers. The 1899 strike in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, demonstrated that the unions could win a strike directed against a subsidiary of one of the large railroads.

Anthracite Coal Strike, September 17, 1900—October 29, 1900: At a convention convened in Hazleton in August 1900, John Mitchell and the United Mine Workers Union attempted to negotiate with the coal operators in the anthracite coal fields for increased wages and improved working conditions, and they issued an invitation to operators to meet to discuss wages and grievances. The operators failed to respond to the invitation or a list of demands (if you please). The operators, a tightly knit group of mine owners, bankers, and railroad owners, all agreed not to negotiate with Mitchell or recognize the UMW. As a result, the union issued a strike call for September 17, 1900, and a majority of the region's work force, approximately 125,000 people, walked off the job. In ten days, 140,000 men and boys were out. Soon afterward practically every mine in the anthracite region was closed.

The cause of the strike was the refusal of the operators to recognize the miners' union (the UMW), abolish company stores, and advance wages of at least ten percent.

Tension between the Miners and the Operators Grows: The militia was sent to the Shenandoah district after a Sheriff's posse had fired on marchers there. The militia was also sent to the Panther Creek Valley to disperse marchers. The UMW, skillfully manipulating public sentiment, publicly implored its members to avoid violence (maintain harmony) during the strike. Harmony prevailed throughout this strike in 1900.

A rally in support of the strike, attended by four thousand men, was held in Carbondale during the third week of September. Hogart's band of Jermyn rendered several selections at the rally. The rally was under the direction of "Organizer Dilcher", the Reverend Dr. J. H. Whalen, pastor of the Berean Baptist Church of Carbondale, and Mr. J. H. Johns. Seated on the platform were several of the local officers of the United Mine Workers. Mr. J. H. Johns, of Moss Side, president of local 844 presided. The rally began at 2:30 P.M. Here is the account of the rally that was published in the *Carbondale Leader* of September 20, 1900:

"ASSEMBLED EARLY. / The crowd began to assemble shortly after one and by half past two fully four thousand men were congregated to hear the addresses. Hogart's band of Jermyn, which had come to this city expecting that an organized parade would be held, rendered several selections, after which Organizer Dilcher and Rev. Dr. Whalen mounted the platform. Seated on the platform were several of the local officers of the United Mine Workers. Mr. J. H. Johns, of Moss Side, president of local 844 presided.

"It was shortly past 2:30 when chairman Johns arose to introduce the first speaker. He spoke of Dr. Whalen's sermon of Sunday night and the interest and friendship it had developed in the miners. It was with pleasure that he introduced Dr. Whalen. Thundering applause greeted the reverend gentleman as he arose. He said in part: 'You have all heard that Pastor Whalen was to address you today but I am only a substitute. Mr. Maguire was unable to attend and the committee has asked me to take his place. I know I cannot handle this subject as he would. . . I have no apology to make to anyone for the stand I have taken on this question [the strike] of right against wrong. It is the place of the Christian ministry to be with this movement. When the angels sang the song at Bethlehem there was in this world oppression. Three-fourths of the inhabitants of the earth lived as the other fourth dictated. Wealth and power was then as it is now, but that child of Bethlehem, the Saviour of the World, has given us a Golden Rule, proving the equality of man. It is the part and place of the Christian ministry to identify the ministry of Christ with this present movement. I have no apology to make. Let apologies come from those ministers who stay at home while these masses assemble.' " (*Carbondale Leader*, September 20, 1900)

Republican Senator Mark Hanna, himself an owner of bituminous coal mines (not involved in the strike) sought to resolve the strike, coming less than two months before the presidential election. He worked through the National Civic Federation which brought labor and capital together.

Relying on J. P. Morgan to convey his message to the industry that a strike would hurt the reelection of Republican William McKinley, Hanna was able to convince the owners to concede a minor wage increase and grievance procedure to the strikers. The union declared victory and dropped its demand (if you please) for union recognition.

The union ended the strike on October 29. Significantly, it must be noted, (1) that the owners did not formally recognize the UMWA as the representative of the workers, and (2) that a structure was not set up to allow for future wage increases.

In the month and a half following the beginning of the strike, UMWA membership increased by over 200,000 mine workers in both bituminous and anthracite mining areas.

On the day following the end of the strike, October 30, John Mitchell, accompanied by Mother Jones, came to Carbondale and was greeted at the railroad station at 6:15 P.M. by thousands of men and women. At 7 P.M. there was a parade in which marched 8,000 miners, many in their mine clothes. At the close of the parade, over 10,000 persons gathered in the vicinity of the Hotel Anthracite to hear addresses from distinguished speakers, including President Mitchell. The report on John Mitchell's visit was a special dispatch to *The North American*, which was reprinted in the *Carbondale Leader* of October 31, 1900. Here is the *Leader's* article on John Mitchell's visit to Carbondale:

"MITCHELL TALKS TO TEN THOUSAND COALDALE [SIC] MINERS / Hundreds Fought to See Union President Eat Supper at His Hotel. / 8000 IN THE PARADE / All the Leaders in their Speeches Urged the Men to Stand Loyal to Their Organization. / Special Dispatch to The North American. / CARBONDALE, Pa., October 30 / A reception such as was never witnessed in this city was accorded President John Mitchell, the executive board of United Mine Workers, and Mother Jones to-night. The party arrived from Archbald at 6:15, thousands

being at the station. When Mitchell stepped from the train thousands of men and women cheered the leader of the miners. / The party was driven to the Harrison House, where hundreds fought for a chance to see Mitchell eat. /

"At 7 o'clock the parade started. It was the most remarkable demonstration ever witnessed here. The men in line numbered eight thousand. Many wore their mine clothes, and in their caps were lighted mine lamps. / The following unions were in line: Forest City Miners, Vandling Miners, Richmondale Miners, Mayfield Miners, Jermyn Miners, breaker boys and drivers, trade unions, Simpson Miners' Local, Dundaff Miners, Miners' Local, No. 969, Miners' Local, No. 944; Miners' Local, No. 877. The business places were all gorgeously decorated. The display of fireworks has never been equaled in this city. / Fred Dilcher [head of the UMW District 1] received a great ovation, and, with Mitchell, was forced to continually bow to the thousands on the line of parade.

"The police were unable to cope with the tremendous crowd, and at an early hour gave up in despair. / At the close of the parade, over ten thousand gathered in the vicinity of the Hotel Anthracite, where addresses were made by President Nicholls, of District No. 1; Rev. H. J. Whalen, of the Baptist Church here; President Fahey, of Schuylkill district; John Dempsey, of District No. 1; Fred H. Dilcher and President Mitchell. Each spoke on the victory won, and advised the men to stand loyal to their organization." (*Carbondale Leader*, October 31, 1900).

"Mother Jones" was present at the rally in Carbondale on October 30, 1900. (Mary Harris Jones, a union activist and campaigner for the United Mine Workers union, was born in Cork, Republic of Ireland, May 1, 1837. She died on November 30, 1930, at Adelphi, Maryland. She founded the Social Democratic Party, and helped establish the Industrial Workers of the World.)

The Rev. J. Davies of Forest City wrote a poem ("The Battle Over") about the "victory" of the miners in the 1900 coal strike. Here is the complete text of that poem:

THE BATTLE OVER. Lines written by Rev. J. Davies, of Forest City, on the miners' victory:
"When now the battle's over / And the vict'ry fairly won, / 'Tis right to praise the victor / By saying—how he done; / The union in a body / On that September day, / Heard Mitchell's voice commanding— / Put now your tools away.

"Chorus—/ Hurrah for this great union, / The U. M. W. of A. / 'Tis right that we should praise it Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!

"The men in one great body / That day—heard the command, / And as a streak of lightning, / Complied with his demand; / They left their dusky chambers, / Like soldiers to the field; / Determined as their leader, / To make the masters yield. / It was a fierce battle— / The enemy was strong. / And many thought the union / Would never last so long; / But now the fact is clear / And read by one and all, / That the miners' ammunition / Was never used at all. / As one they stuck together, / Through this now noted strike, / Has kept the law and order, / We never heard the like; / 'Twas this, that brought the vict'ry; / 'Twas this that won the day; / Forget they will—no never! The U. M. W. of A., / Your leader has been working / For vict'ry day and night, / And in a noble manner / Conducted this great fight; / With Mitchell at the throttle, / And Dilcher raising heat; / And Dempsey doing the brakin / This train—they could not beat. / This union train now started may ever keep the rails, / This righteous ship of labor, / Spread more and more your sails; / The

road to vict'ry's heavy / The sea to shore is rough; / But God of Heaven is with you / And is not that enough. / Keep friendly, boys, together; / Act as you were but one, / And keep in mind this vict'ry / That you have newly won; / And tell it to your children / While on this earth you stay— / And sing to them this chorus / The U. M. W. of A.

"Chorus: / Hurrah for this great union, / The U. M. W. of A. / 'Tis right that we should praise it / Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

As we noted above, even though the coal operators eventually conceded to the union's demands in 1900, the operators did not, however, recognize the UMWA as the workers' representative. Remarkably, throughout this strike in 1900, and to the credit of all concerned, harmony prevailed in the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania.

The 1900 anthracite strike achieved no significant improvements in miners' working conditions. Pay remained low by any standard and frequent layoffs remained the norm, as did the feudal system (so called) of the company town. The total financial loss realized by all concerned was \$10,000,000 (loss in wages to miners, \$4 million; loss to operators, \$4 million; loss in railroad earnings, \$2 million). Not surprisingly, because of the strike, anthracite output for 1900 was less than in 1899.

In the D&H Annual Report of the D&H Managers to the Stockholders for 1890, we read the following about the 1900 strike: "A general strike occurred September 15th and continued until October 9th, causing a serious interruption in the mining operations and reducing the total quantity mined 166,174.17 tons below that of the preceding year. Had normal conditions prevailed, the total would have been increased not less than from 500,000 to 600,000 tons. When it is borne in mind that many of the expenses incident thereto continued during the suspension of mining when revenue from the sale of coal was almost altogether cut off, the result of the year's business is a gratifying evidence of the earning power of the Company."

The 1900 Strike set the stage for the nationally significant 1902 strike in the anthracite region, and provided John Mitchell and his union with important lessons on political maneuvering and public relations.

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